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ABSTRACT

In order to understand why the peer editing groups of freshman collaborative writing classes often fail, an investigation of the collaborative processes of basic and experienced writers was carried out at the University of Missouri (Kansas City). Observation of two freshman composition classes (both containing basic and advanced writers) revealed that peer response groups often focus on the wrong part of the writing process--editing. Basic writers in the classes, as well as some of the experienced writers, were deficient in critical reading skills, and were not able to read their peers' texts critically. In addition, while for the proficient writers reflective dialogue on assigned readings provided the basis for competent analytical writing, basic writers usually held unproductive conversations about the reading. It was also found that in order for students to progress, they need to practice reading, interpreting, and responding to professional writing before they can respond to peer writing. On the basis of the classroom observations, a four step sequence of collaborative writing instruction, which promotes development of critical reading and analytical writing skills through peer and teacher modeling, was developed: (1) a class-wide, teacher-led discussion on a reading of interest to students; (2) small group discussion of the reading; (3) a collaborative writing assignment, which students complete in small groups; and (4) individual writing assignments. (Five references and a handout describing the four-step sequence of instruction are included.) (ARH)

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COLLABORATION WITH BASIC WRITERS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

Joan Rothstein-Vandergriff and Joan Tedrow Gilson

Our paper, which describes the results of our investigation of the collaborative processes of basic and experienced student writers, focuses on students enrolled in two freshman composition classes at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. At our university it is in these freshman classes that we find many of our basic writers, since we have large numbers of basic writers entering our university, few spaces in our basic writing classes, and a general reluctance on the part of our students to take a basic writing class prior to freshman composition. The result is that we have, in our freshman composition classes, students with skills ranging from basic to advanced.

In our freshman composition classes, students worked individually, in pairs, and as part of collaborative groups. Like most teachers, though, we've been frustrated by the familiar phenomenon of nonfunctioning peer editing groups. The groups we saw were often characterized by the incoherencies, stumblings, and silences so painfully apparent from the sample dialogue below, which we've named "the Monday Morning Writing Group."

Rough Drafts are due during this class period, and the students begin moving desks about in preparation for group work. We watch as, desks arranged and papers shuffled, a lone student with a prepared rough draft begins to read her paper to the group.

Stumbling over a word, she interjects, "I don't know what word to use here. . .."

The student then continues a self-conscious, hurried reading: "During

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Harriet Beecher Stowe's young woman years, during her younger years she lived in Cincinnati, which was a city on the border between a slave state and a free state."

She looks up and asks the group, "Does anyone know where Cincinnati is?"

A group member replies dispiritedly, "It's in Ohio."

"What part of Ohio?"

"In the middle."

The group falls into a lengthy silence.

Another group member shifts uncomfortably, then volunteers, "Well, Ohio comes down like this, and then Kentucky--"

The writer asks, "Is Cincinnati on the border? You're right."

"Cincinnati's not on the border of anything."

A fourth group member, previously silent, asks, "We're talking about the United States, right?"

Ignoring the attempt at humor, the writer finishes reading her draft, and the group responds with perfunctory comments:

"It sounds o.k. to me."

"Yeah, it's o.k."

In spite of classes like that depicted above, we, and most teachers, have been encouraged by leading members of our profession and by our own successful experiences as collaborators to continue using collaborative processes in our composition classrooms. When we put theory into practice, however, especially in our classes with a fairly large population of basic writers, we find that our collaborative peer editing groups fail to provide students with meaningful responses, and furthermore, the basic writers in these groups are often relegated to the role of mute witnesses to the proceedings. Thus, our basic writers, sometimes intimidated by more domineering though often less

able group members, are the real losers.

With these realities in mind, we set out to study the processes of collaborative learning for the full range of students we saw in our classes, observing and analyzing conversations and interactions among students working on a series of reading and writing assignments in our two composition classes. From our observations we hoped to find ways to improve not only how we taught but what we taught, with our central goal to make a better learning environment for all of our students.

Originally, our students, like students in most traditional composition classes, carried out a sequence of tasks involving individual reading and individual writing plus teacher-led discussion, with collaboration tagging along at the end in the form of peer-group editing. Collaboration, then, centered on student response to student writing, and as we saw in the sample dialogue, that response, for the most part, focused on superficial characteristics of texts.

After analyzing our students' collaborative processes, we are now convinced that we have been focusing our collaborative work in our classes at the wrong place in the sequence of tasks we assigned our students--that student writers are not yet prepared to approach their peers' and their own texts in a truly meaningful way until they've had lots of practice talking and sharing the results of their reading and their writing about reading with other students.

We had always assumed that our freshmen students came to us with solid reading skills, but our classroom observations proved otherwise. When we asked students to read and then write summaries and responses to what they had read, it became clear, quite quickly, that our basic writers and even some of our more experienced writers as well were unable to determine main ideas in their reading, were unable to differentiate between main ideas and minor

points, and were unable, as a consequence, to draw accurate inferences from reading materials. This deficiency in reading skills certainly presented a major handicap to students attempting to respond to and analyze professional writing, and it doomed them to failure when attempting to respond to writing in peer editing groups.

It was also evident that for our truly proficient writers that reflective dialogue provided the basis for competent analytical writing, and that these students found their focus for analytical writing most often and most easily by reflective response and conversation about reading.

We observed that basic and experienced writers responded to reading quite differently.

Basic writers tended to respond quickly, without reflection, often focusing only on their experiences as they related to the reading material. The dialogue below is evidence of one such conversation.

Ron and Mark, two inexperienced writers, were assigned readings representing varied points of view on guns, gun control, and vigilantism. They were asked to compose collaboratively a short response to these articles. Ron leads off the discussion by reporting his emotional response, then moving to a cliched generalization:

"I can really relate to that reading. . . I was brought up that way. It's a shame that things are coming to where they are--legislation on handguns..."

Mark comments briefly, "Yeah, well, handguns, but I still don't see . . . " The discussion flounders in the lengthy silence characteristic of this sort of nonreflective dialogue. Then Ron reverts once more to an unprovable generalization in a misguided and futile attempt to move the talk along.

"There a lot of people that if they couldn't shoot someone would just stab them. There are a lot of weird people drunk. . ."

The silence returns, and Mark, uncomfortable, attempts closure. The

attempt is unsuccessful, however, because he has only a perfunctory solution to offer:

"I think we're close to arguing that legislation won't solve the problem."

We can see that the conversation floats on the surface of the issue, punctuated by silences, as the students continue to see the content of the reading and its related arguments in terms of aphorisms and other, spontaneous, nonthreatening responses. The speakers' goals seemed to be solely to reach a quick consensus.

When we looked at the conversations among more experienced writers, the dialogues were quite different. We saw that accomplished student writers examined the content of reading first in terms of specific issues raised, and then in terms of how those issues related to the wider world of human experience. This difference in approach, gut reaction versus thoughtful reflection, may be at the root of the basic writer's difficulty with reading, and consequently, with writing extended analytical discourse.

When our more proficient writers discussed the essay on gun control, their discussion was wide ranging yet specific. They reflected on how guns had become a natural part of many people's lives, they discussed the new laser tag games and what this phenomenon told them about our feelings about firearms, and they explored the use of guns to provide easy solutions to all dilemmas in popular movies such as "Rambo" and the Chuck Connors films. Students ended this conversation by responding to one student's personal experience with guns, when her father stood guard with a shotgun one night after hearing about the escape of a convicted murderer from a nearby prison.

The timing of her comment was significant: we found that when accomplished writers did discuss personal experience in relation to their reading, it was only after they had examined the topic from a wider context; they brought in their personal experiences merely as one piece of evidence for or against an already established point of view, rather than using personal exper-

ience as the only response as our basic writers had.

Unlike our basic writers, then, whose single goal seemed to be to reach a quick consensus no matter what that consensus was, it was only after our experienced writers had examined various rhetorical stances on issues that these writers began to narrow the topic to an arguable, specific position, one reached eventually through exploration, negotiation, and discovery within the group.

As we worked through our transcripts of conversations, the obvious question emerged: how do we help our basic writers to develop the skills demonstrated by our more accomplished writers?

Our experience as teachers convinced us that using both peer and instructor modeling is one effective method for teaching reflective thought. Thus, our collaborative groups had to consist of students of varying reading and writing abilities in order to ensure that our more proficient students would help provide examples of competent reading and writing processes, groups where basic writers could witness and eventually participate in (as Bruffee says) good talk that leads to good knowledge.

But since basic writers are often overwhelmed by the loquaciousness of better writers, we must, from the very beginning, train our students to invite response from every group member and to ensure that students encourage rather than discourage dialogue.

Also, instructors have to take an active part in group conversation; we must model reflective dialogue for our students. This modeling is especially important for our basic writers who often are satisfied with quick, nonreflective responses. It is here that the teacher can model questioning techniques and responses that lead students beyond yes/no and superficial responses like those we observed in our study. It is also here

that teachers can slow down the response process, encouraging students to reflect before speaking.

In collaborative work, then, the teacher shares her expertise as thinker and responder with each group. The teacher serves as role model, not as authority figure. This is an important distinction, as she is present to model and extend discussion, not to cut it off by presenting the single, "correct" point of view.

Finally, we are convinced that for collaboration to be an effective part of the learning environment that manipulating the population of groups, training students to respond, and modeling responses aren't sufficient to make a substantial difference in student performance.

For our students to make progress, we found that rather than responding to student writing in peer editing groups, basic writers, especially, need first to practice reading, interpreting, and responding to professional writing. To put it simply--before students can respond to peer writing, they need to have mastered the skills necessary to read texts critically. Thus we use our peer response groups first and from the very beginning of our semester, to have students gain proficiency in reading. Students read, write summaries, share their writing, talk, rewrite, talk, and finally reach consensus about a text they've read. Only when they've worked through a series of collaborative activities which involve prereading, responding to reading, prewriting, and drafting, do we ask students to write individual essays and then to respond (as critical readers) to the writing of their peers.

By working collaboratively within an enabling intellectual context, on a clearly defined sequence of activities that moves from reflective thinking and good talk about reading to analytical writing and good talk about reading, students grow more competent as readers, responders, and talkers. It is only at this point that we can then ask them to respond reflectively to their own

writing and that of their peers.

The results of our study clearly indicate that using collaboration to foster critical reading and response can bring about student success for all levels of students, if we move away from the traditional peer editing model of collaboration. When once our writers stymied us with their aimless, unproductive group processes, we know see that Kenneth Bruffee is indeed right when he promises that better talk does make for better writing. We would like to add that it makes for better reading and thinking as well.

Before we explain our sequence of collaborative instruction, we believe that it's important to clarify how we create a collaborative atmosphere for our basic writers.

We begin the semester by creating groups--we often use a diagnostic essay to populate groups with students at a variety of skill levels. We also try to mix groups according to gender, race, and age, when possible.

Once we've created the groups, then we assign a reading selection to begin the sequence of instruction. We make sure that the selection treats a subrelevant to our students' lives. Gore Vidal's short, polemical essay, "Drugs," works well here. Vidal advocates the legalization of all drugs, and students nearly always respond to the piece.

The sequence starts with the class arranged in one large group. At the beginning, our students benefit from a general, teacher-led discussion on the topic of the reading. Various prereading techniques can be used to help familiarize students with the topic and the issues which the reading might address. This kind of discussion is necessary if we want students to learn how to pick out main ideas and adequately analyze reading. The teacher is the best model for this process.

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The second stage of the sequence is a collaborative reading assignment. Students break up into preassigned groups to work with the reading. A member of the group reads the selection aloud, then students think about the selection before discussing it. Students are often asked to write individual summaries at to share with the group so they can verify the content of the reading, establish what the text says literally. We slow the reading process down at this point.

In the ensuing discussion, the group begins preparing a collaborative response to the reading which must include a summary of the reading and also some reflection on the content. It is vital that the group work through the main ideas of the reading and come to a consensus about what the key points are. Students need not agree on their response: in fact, groups may have majority and minority reports in their responses--but not in the summaries.

By watching better writers summarize, basic readers and writers can see how to break reading down into manageable segments, then reassemble and synthesize these segments into a meaningful unit.

We begin our accountability procedure here with the report to the class. After working in groups, students come back together as a class to share their group summaries and responses and to discuss the significance and meaning of the reading, with instructor guidance. Again, we've drawn the reading process out, slowed it down to give basic writers a chance to step into the game.

After careful reading, students are ready for stage 3, a collaborative writing assignment. We have students produce an ungraded group paper. This paper is usually a synthesis of individual responses to the reading and is taken through at least one full draft by the group. Basic writers thus have the opportunity to witness more skilled writers solving the problems of composing: questions of subject, audience and purpose. We slow down the composing process, as we did the reading process.

And again, groups must return to the class, be accountable for their functioning. Each group reports to the class on their collaborative process, and the instructor takes this opportunity to evaluate the collaboration and provide alternate strategies for poorly functioning groups. We ask our students for memoranda: "How's your group working? What problems are you having? What are you going to do about them?"

The fourth stage is the individual writing assignment. The final assignment is an individual graded essay, which details the student's response to the reading. Students are given time to create the assignment and are provided with concrete instruction concerning audience, subject, and purpose.

Our students continue to work together, even at this stage. Before composing, they talk through their papers with their groups, in essence composing a verbal pre-zero draft, working out what they see their paper doing, who the readers are, what the paper looks like, how they want their readers to respond. (This "Mental Paper" discussion is a good way to allay writing apprehension, we have also found.)

Again, when students have produced a first draft, they meet together, tackling questions of meaning, not copy editing, and in later drafts matters of language, not comma use. Group work can even extend to evaluation if that fits with the teacher's philosophy.

As individuals, then, our group members, with enough time and practice, can and do improve their writing skills.

Another impressive dividend that we've discovered is that the collaborative groups become the source of good friendships. Our university is a large, urban commuter campus, and students frequently don't get the opportunity to make friends, to participate in a network of students, to create the kind of emotional and intellectual support a person needs to get through college.

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The small-group structure allows the students to get to know each other better, and all of our students--racial minorities, handicapped students, and basic writers, the people who often feel lost and anonymous in the traditional lecture-style classroom--all of these people grow to feel more a part of the university. Everyone has a "study buddy" to call up and discuss assignments with or just chat about how the "K-roo's" (our new Division One basketball team) are doing. We've seen a full fledged novel/discussion group emerge from class groups, and we feel that the context of the collaborative groups has given our basic writers a chance to create a real place for themselves in the university community.

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COLLABORATION WITH BASIC WRITERS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTION

1. CLASS DISCUSSION: PREREADING

Before group work on reading begins, students benefit from a general teacher-led discussion on the topic of the reading to be assigned. Various prereading techniques can be used to help familiarize students with the topic and the issues which the topic of the reading might address. This kind of discussion is necessary if we want students to learn how to pick out main ideas and adequately analyze reading. The teacher is the best model for this process.

2. COLLABORATIVE READING ASSIGNMENT

Students break up into pre-assigned groups to work with the reading. A member of the group reads the selection aloud, then students think about the selection before discussing it. Students might be asked to write individual summaries to share with the group. In the ensuing discussion, the group begins preparing a collaborative response to the reading which must include a summary of the reading and also some reflection on the content. It is vital that the group work through the main ideas of the reading and come to a consensus about what the key points are. Students need not agree in their response; in fact, groups may have majority and minority reports in their responses--but not in the summaries.

By watching better writers summarize, basic readers and writers can see how to break reading down into manageable segments, then reassemble and synthesize those segments into a meaningful unit.

Report to the class: After working in groups, students come together as a class to share their group summaries and responses and to discuss the significance and meaning of the reading, with instructor guidance.

3. COLLABORATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENT

We next have students produce an ungraded group paper. This paper is usually a synthesis of the individual responses to the reading and is taken through at least one full draft by the group. Basic writers thus have the opportunity to witness more skilled writers solving the problems of composing: questions of subject, audience, and purpose.

Report to the class: Again each group reports to the class on their collaborative process, and the instructor takes this opportunity to evaluate the collaboration and provide alternate strategies for poorly functioning groups.

4. INDIVIDUAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT

The final assignment in this sequence is an individual graded essay, which details the student's response to the reading. Students are given time to create the assignment and are provided with concrete instruction concerning audience, subject and purpose.

Group work: Students, before composing, talk through their paper with their group, in essence composing a verbal pre-zero draft, working out what they see their paper doing, who the readers are, what the paper looks like, how they want their readers to respond. Again when students have produced a first draft, they meet in groups tackling questions of meaning not copy editing, and in later drafts matters of language, not comma use. Group work can even extend to evaluation if that fits the instructor's teaching philosophy.

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TITLE: Collaboration Among Basic and Skilled Writers in the Composition Classroom

This paper provides specific data on collaborative processes taking place in two college freshman composition classrooms. From case studies of peer response groups, we distinguish a profile of qualities present in both unsuccessful and successful collaborative efforts. We also present both method and rationale for structuring collaborative activities and assignments aimed to improve not only writers' composing skills but their reading and analytical skills as well. The results of our observations clearly show that peer response groups often focus on the wrong part of the writing process, that before students can respond to peer writing, they need to have mastered the skills necessary to read texts critically. Our paper presents an approach for using collaboration to help foster critical reading and response in a group context first before students tackle reading and responding to peer and finally their own texts.

NOTE: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Conference on Composition (St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988)